

U.S. Assay Office  
206 Broadway Street  
Helena  
Lewis and Clark County  
Montana

HABS No. MT-26

HABS  
MONT,  
25-HEL,  
11-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

HABS  
MONT,  
25-HEL,  
11 -

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

U. S. ASSAY OFFICE

HABS No. MT-26

ADDRESS: 206 Broadway St., Helena, Lewis and Clark County, Montana.

OWNER: Clyde A. & Wanda J. Christofferson

OCCUPANT: Various Tenants and owner

USE: Apartment House

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

The large volume of gold and silver mined in the Montana Territory prompted the Treasury Department to build a United States Assay Office close to the source. Funds were appropriated by Act of Congress on May 12, 1874.

The handsome red brick two-story structure was designed by A. S. Mullett, Supervising Architect for the Treasury Department, who also designed the old San Francisco Mint Building and the State, War and Navy Building in Washington, D.C. It was completed under the direction of Mullett's successor, William Appleton Potter.

Russell S. Harrison, great-grandson of William Henry Harrison, (the 9th president of the United States) and son of Benjamin Harrison (who would serve as 23rd president of the United States, 1889-1892), was appointed Superintendent of the Assay Office in November, 1878. He served in this position until he resigned in November, 1885.

A government report of 1919 indicated that the business transacted in the Helena Assay Office, one of five in the country, was exceeded only by the receipts of the Seattle office. Activity declined after that, however, and the Helena Assay Office closed July 1, 1934.

## HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

The need for a U. S. Assay office in the heart of the mining area in Montana Territory was evident early in the 1870's. A bill was submitted to Congress in 1872 to provide funds for such a structure. Appropriations for construction were finally approved by the 42nd Congress on May 12, 1874. Additional funds were also approved on July 31, 1876, August 15, 1876, and June 20, 1878.

A lot on the northeast corner of Broadway and Warren Streets in Helena was purchased for \$1,500. It had a frontage along the south side of Broadway of about 150' and ran 100' deep along the west side of Warren Street. Excavation of the building began in the summer of 1875.

The cornerstone-laying ceremony was held on October 1, 1875, conducted by the Grand Lodge of Montana. Among the Masonic officers participating in the ceremony was Wilbur Fisk Sanders, who gave the oration for the occasion. Sanders was an early settler in the Montana Territory, and prominent as a vigilante, lawyer, and statesman.

Construction proceeded with the stonework, which was erected by Daniel Steele. On August 10, 1876, the Helena Weekly Herald reported that the walls of the Assay Office were complete and the building was ready for the roof. On November 23, 1876, the same paper stated that the machinery was being placed in position, the plasterers were putting on the finishing coat, the roof was being painted and the lot graded.

The Assay Office began operations on January 15, 1877. The amount of gold and silver melted at this office for the fiscal year ending on June 30, 1878, was \$331,460.50. From 1862 to the close of 1878, the Montana Territory had contributed \$154,017,000 to the world's wealth -- \$147,000,000 in gold and the balance in silver. By 1885, the mining output of the Territory had increased to \$12,500,000 for that year, of which \$9,171,00 was in silver and \$3,409,000 in gold. In 1878 there were about sixty stamp mills and concentra-

ting works in the Territory, and more than 1,000 gulch or placer mines had been discovered.

Russell Harrison was appointed Superintendent of the Assay Office in 1878. His father was General Benjamin Harrison, U. S. Senator from Indiana, and destined to be the 23rd president of the United States. Senator Harrison became the first U. S. Senator to visit Helena when he came to see his son on August 20, 1881, following a trip to Yellowstone Park. He stayed for a week's visit in his son's living quarters in the Assay Office.

In 1889, the Helena Herald reported that "the largest gold bar in the world," valued at \$100,000 was cast at the U. S. Assay Office for Colonel Charles A. Broadwater's Montana National Bank. It was cast from a number of small bars, the gold coming from the Spotted Horse, Drum Lummon, and Jay Gould mines. It took six men eight hours to melt down the bullion before it was cast, and it took all night for it to cool. The bar was cast in the shape of a pyramid and weighed 6,945 ounces (434 lbs.). After the people of Helena had viewed it at the Montana National Bank, it was shipped east on the Manitoba to the Minneapolis Exposition, and from there to New York City. On September 23, 1889, it was on display at the Chase National Bank in New York City.

A changing economy finally doomed the local Assay Office. After operations were closed down in 1934, the building served for a time as governmental office space. On March 15, 1938, the government sold the building to Grover C. Threat on installments. On September 25, 1938, Threat transferred all of his interests in the property to Julius McDonald.

Nels Bergman purchased the Assay Office from McDonald on January 9, 1946. The building was converted to apartments by either McDonald or Bergman, and housed a succession of tenants after this. In February, 1958, the property was purchased by Clyde A. and Wanda J. Christofferson. Mr. Christofferson is a carpenter and a minister of the Faith Tabernacle. He is building

a church on the corner of Broadway and Warren Streets backed up against the old Assay Office building. The Assay Office has been cut into five apartments; the Rev. Christofferson and his family occupy one and rent out the others.

#### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND SOURCES:

Abstract for the property prepared by Helena Abstract & Title Co., Feb. 6, 1958.

Buskett, Evans W., "United States Assay Office at Helena, Montana," The Mining World, May 16, 1908, p. 797.

Campbell, William L., From the Quarries of Last Chance Gulch, Helena, Mont., 1951, Vol. I.

Helena Herald, Helena, Mont., 1875, 1876, 1877, 1878.

History of Public Buildings Under the Control of the Treasury Department, Gov't. Printing Office, 1901, p.353.

Leeson, M. A., History of Montana 1739-1885, Warner, Beers & Co., Chicago, 1885.

Stout, Tom, Montana - Its Story and Biography, American Historical Society, Chicago, 1921.

Thresher, Frank L., Helena Illustrated, 1890.

Personal interview with the Rev. C. A. Christofferson.

#### ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION:

Exterior: The handsome two-story brick structure appears externally today much as it did in 1877, when the Assay Office opened its doors for business. The red brick is accented by the light gray stone window and door trim and horizontal courses that link the openings.

Overall Dimensions - 41'-8" wide, paralleling Broadway and 49'-2" in depth, with a one story brick addition, 27'-4" x 16'-4" on the north and extending to the east, which links the main structure with a one story brick storage building, 25'-1" x 16'-2". Both this building and the addition are constructed in the same fashion as the main structure.

Foundations - stone, partially exposed above grade.

Wall Construction - brick bearing walls 24" thick on the first floor and stepped back to 16" on the upper floor.

Openings - Entrance: Two large wood paneled doors, 3'-0" x 7'-0" on the front (south) facade. Each has a single light and is capped by a rectangular transom light.

Windows: Rectangular 2/2 double-hung wood windows are capped by double-paned transoms set within arched stone caps with distinctive keystones. The simple balanced composition has a single window located in the wall on each side of the first floor main entrance. The second floor has thin single windows centered above the two first floor windows and the main entry. The side facades have both single windows and windows set in groups of two units each. The mansard roof is pierced on the front by a centrally-positioned gable containing a group of two windows. On the east and west are two dormer windows.

Roof - metal covered mansard.

Chimneys - numerous brick chimneys which accommodated the fireplaces have been removed.

Interior: Little can be noted of the original interior layout due to numerous remodelings and the division of the space into apartments on the first and second floors. There is also one apartment in the attic space and one large room that the owner plans to convert into another apartment.

Ceilings have been lowered, walls paneled, etc., but here and there are remains of the original wood trim and plaster walls. All of the assaying equipment has long since been removed. Assaying was done with a touchstone and in gas-fired muffle furnaces.

Evans W. Buskett gives a description of the interior in his article "United States Assay Office at Helena, Montana", The Mining World, May 16, 1908, p.797:

"Entering the hall, the depositor is confronted by an iron screen in which is a heavily barred door. At the left is a large window at which the gold is entered. On a table in this window is a large bullion balance on which the gold bars are weighed. This balance is capable of weighing from 1,000 ozs. down to a fraction of a grain.

"After weighing, the bar is stamped with a number and is handed to the melters. Each bar is melted, which detects such frauds as filling the center of the bar with lead, copper or other heavy metal.

"Entering the iron door and turning to the right, the visitor is in the melting room. This room is equipped with several sizes of melting furnaces, from one having a capacity of only a few ounces to that with a capacity of melting a 1,000 oz. bar. These furnaces are heated by gas which is mixed with air and blown tangentially into the furnace....

"The floor of the melting room proper, which is a small room about 10' x 12', is covered with sheet iron to prevent the loss of gold by accident."

The sheet iron floor mentioned above has been removed. Little record can be found of the rest of the floor layout. The assay office was located on the second floor.

Floors are covered with rugs or tile, but here and there the original wood floor is evident. Of interest is the  $1\frac{1}{2}$ " layer of shale between the layers of the wood floor. This was discovered by the present owner who is a carpenter by trade as well as minister of the adjacent Faith Tabernacle that he is building. Since the shale has no structural value, it may be assumed to be there for fireproofing.

Two large walk-in vaults on the first floor have been removed, but one remains today in the basement area.

GENERAL SETTING:

The Assay Office was built at the intersection of Broadway and Warren Streets, with the main entrance on Broadway. In recent years, a church building has been under construction on the ground between the Assay Office and Warren Street, so that it no longer occupies a corner position.

Prepared by: John N. DeHaas, Jr.  
Architect (12/67)  
Edited and Reviewed by:  
Eleni Silverman, HABS  
September 1983